

One Nation and Labour Renewal

Andrew S Crines

The purpose of this paper is to posit a few thoughts on One Nation Labour, why it emerged as the next stage of renewal, and whether it has a future as a core tenet of Labour thinking. It is first important to acknowledge that the Labour Party has a strong tradition of ideological revisionism and division which strove to justify socialism and social democracy as means of addressing economic difficulties in Britain.

To name but a few there are the Keep Left Group, the Bevanites, the Gaitskellites, Wilsonian Scientific Socialism, the Bevanites, the Bennites, the modernisers, New Labour, and now One Nation Labour.¹ It could be noted that, when evaluating the longevity of these traditions their trajectory inevitably tends towards a downward spiral!

For example the Keep Left Group had a very short period of prominence before morphing in the longer lasting Bevanite faction. But even here the Bevanites were not really a cohesive group – indeed, they can be regarded as something of a reaction to the social democratic Gaitskellites following Bevan's departure from the Labour cabinet in 1950.

The Gaitskellite faction enjoyed greater success because, arguably, they were – by default – closer to the leadership by way of Hugh, who held the leadership until his unexpected death in 1963. During that time he strove to modernise the party in terms of Clause 4, but

the uphill struggle he faced understandably gave the impression of a highly divided and fractious party that was simply unable to govern.

Thus under Harold Wilson's leadership he sought to unify the party more under the banner of Scientific Socialism. Rhetorically, this was an attempt to bury the divisions of the 1950s by embracing the realities of a changing society in the 1960s.² Put simply, new technologies and working practices offered a new vision for Britain. Labour could no longer afford the indulgence and electoral risks of ideological division, and so Wilson presented his alternative to the conference, and by writing the short book *The Relevance of British Socialism*.³ It was enough to secure power, but not enough to avoid an early election, which came in 1966. The realities of governing, however saw Scientific Socialism lose much of its contemporary veneer, thereby becoming a virtual irrelevance by the end of Wilson's second term in 1970. Furthermore, by time the 1970s rolled around, ideological rumblings in the constituencies were beginning to be felt.

During the course of the coming decade, and partly enabled by the abolition of the Proscribed List, what became the Bennites were emerging at various levels of the Labour movement.⁴ The moderate Bevanite Left, now chiefly articulated by Michael Foot and Barbara Castle was losing its rebellious feel, especially given *In Place of Strife* and Foot's elevation to the Front Benches.⁵ Indeed, the left was becoming increasingly disgruntled by the sense of betrayal, thus by time the Labour government of 1974 was defeated in 1979, the Bennites was an increasingly prominent feature of Labour thought. Indeed, Stuart Holland's *The Socialist Challenge* helped present an alternative vision for the Left, which was

later given rocket boosters by Benn's authoritative oratory, and the release of *Arguments for Socialism* and *Arguments for Democracy*. The period between 1979 and 1982 was a time of great philosophical disagreement, yet Michael Foot's defence of a more moderate conception of the left – coupled with the Healey Deputy Leadership victory – put the Bennites into retreat by 1982.

The experience of 1983, of course, left a deep scare on the Labour Party which is still felt today. Thus, Kinnock's modernisation agenda presented another shift away from traditional Labourism in a similar manner to Wilson. As with Wilson, Kinnock offered a unifying alternative which would be hard fought for, particularly following the miners' strike and his 1985 conference speech.⁶

The change was also more pronounced given the Bennite experience, thus it created the mistaken impression of abandoning socialism entirely. Yet, the Kinnock programme, the Smith reforms, and ultimately the Blair inheritance are each consistent with the long standing values of Labour's evolutionary socialism. This is a key issue when evaluating how Labour changes over time.

The New Labour modernisation programme was, as we know, a reflection of specific global realities which were unavoidable. British society, British politics, and the world in which Britain existed was vastly different to the UK of the 1970s.⁷ Blair inherited a different world to Wilson. Also, the same can be said of Wilson in 1964, who inherited a very different set of circumstances to Attlee in 1945. It is a fact of political life that change

happens whilst in opposition, with the next Labour Prime Minister inheriting a different set of circumstances to the previous Labour government.

So, now that the history lesson is more or less concluded, this brings us bang up to date with the question – what about Labour in 2015?

Obviously Miliband's inheritance will be very different to Blair in 1997, but more than that. It will be different to the Labour Party which Brown led after 2007. New Labour was a very successful renewal strategy, but it was very much a product of its time. Today One Nation Labour is also a product of its time.

Of course One Nation has its origins in the Conservative Party with Disraeli's *Sybil* and critique of Britain's Two Nations, however as Tim Bale argues in his *Five Year Mission*, "David Cameron and his Conservative colleagues had forfeited ownership of his mantle by raising taxes on ordinary families and cutting them for millionaires" and also "by dividing the nation between north and south, public and private".⁸ Put simply, the Tories have renounced any ownership of One Nation in favour of neoliberalism.

Also, the concept of One Nation is challenged by the realities of the UK being under threat from nationalism, it is challenged by social deprivation, and it is challenged by an uneven economic recovery.

But putting these challenges to one side for a moment, One Nation Labour was effective in fulfilling its purpose. Namely, affording Miliband with a message of change and hope which stood aside from New Labour without reverting to the ideological conflicts discussed earlier. Indeed, such was the effectiveness of New Labour that few in the Party would today describe themselves as either Bennite or even Bevanite, but many still cling to the values of social democracy, which was essentially Croslandite in its philosophical makeup. Thus, One Nation Labour – like New Labour before it – has built upon the tradition of social democracy by presenting a new framework of policies whilst embracing the realities of a changed Britain.

Another purpose of One Nation Labour was to enable Miliband to present himself to the Labour Party as a leader who could win power. Up until that point he had faced the Conservative charges that he was weak, incompetent, and lacked moral character. He was associated with Wallace, called Red Ed by the right wing press, and also that he stabbed his brother in the back to secure the leadership. These were all personal attacks. In rhetorical terms, they were designed to undermine Miliband's rhetorical ethos – namely, this character.⁹ Even today, as the Tories campaign for power, these are being resurrected because of the perceived damage they could do to Miliband's image. By doing so, the Tories aim to cast Miliband as strange, unworldly, and very different in terms of values to the electorate.

Therefore, in order to counter these charges, in 2012 and 2013 Miliband gave highly significant conference speeches in which he set out who he was, why he is in the Labour

Party, and what he wants to see Labour do in the future. He talked about his background, how his father fled persecution, and why he wants to lead the party. It was an effective speech because it spoke to the values of those in the conference hall, set out a new and clear version of Labourism, and helped convince the audience that he could take them back to power. More than that, it also introduced his persona.

The 2012 speech rested within a week-long series of other events which were designed to grow this persona.¹⁰ For example Michael Sandel's address the conference illustrated that Miliband was connected with intellectualism, and that the values he could espouse would have enhanced credibility with the electorate as his persona travelled beyond the conference hall.

Miliband also appeared on the *Andrew Marr Show* where he explained who he was, and how his values were largely informed by his upbringing. Furthermore, a written piece on Miliband's background appeared in the *New Statesman*, as did a discussion of his persona written by Alan Johnson for the *Guardian*. These were targeted in the belief they would be seen by conference delegates, as well as the broader electorate, thereby introducing his competent character to the conference. As John Gaffney argued, in concert with each other, it gave the impression that the conference was revolving around Miliband. No one would be left in any doubt who he was, and what he believed in.

It was his likable persona upon which One Nation Labour would be built. He wanted to appear approachable, understanding, and by reflecting on the correspondence he received

from members of the electorate, in touch with the voter. Put simply, he ensured people knew who he was, and more importantly, that he wasn't Red Ed or Wallace. As I argue in my chapter for the recently released *Labour Orators* volume, it worked well because it showed he was human. I don't have time to go into that in too much detail here, however it was a strategy which worked because he was addressing a broadly sympathetic audience.

So, moving on, what exactly comprises One Nation Labour, anyway? Put simply, it is a set of principles around which Miliband strives to lead the Labour Party, and intends to use as a base for governing the country should he prove successful in a week or so. Like New Labour, Scientific Socialism, and the Gaitskellites before that, One Nation Labour seeks to embrace the changed realities of modern Britain. Thus, the tenets around which it revolves are those inequalities which Miliband believes Labour should now focus on in the second half of this decade.

These are promoting social welfare, education reform, economic change and banking reform. The reforms intend to change the relationship between the state, market, and the third sector. The involvement of each is vital, argues Miliband, for creating One Nation and a sense of 'togetherness' for British society. By bringing each together, Miliband argues that One Nation can be created by ensuring each contributes towards alleviating social injustice, poverty, and promoting equality of opportunity. This is because, Miliband suggests, the private sector has a social responsibility to the country in which it does business, whilst the state exists to ensure market conditions protect the vulnerable and promotes equality.

More generally One Nation Labour is also a commitment to the Union of Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland because of the underlying belief that social democracy is best achievable within the same political frameworks. Indeed, he argues that the Scottish Nationalists are not social democrats because they strive to break away from those who want to promote economic and social togetherness. Rather he argues the UK is better together because the single union promotes and enables unity amongst those who share the same ideology.

Moreover, One Nation Labour also commits to the NHS because it symbolises care, consideration for others, and the collective ideal of compassion. Of course this is consistent with each of the renewal monikers throughout Labour history, yet the *reaffirmation* of it is key within the political contexts of possible privatisation. Indeed, One Nation Labour aims to protect the principle of universal provision of expertise which the private sector simply isn't in a position to provide.

Thus although One Nation Labour may strive to manage the economy and the country in a different way to New Labour, the aspiration of alleviating social ills is the same. Indeed, that was also there with Kinnock, Wilson, Gaitskell, and Attlee.

Now we can turn our attention to addressing the question over the future of One Nation Labour. What future does it have? Well, as I've striven to demonstrate, One Nation Labour

sits within the broader tradition of social justice and democracy which has travelled with the Labour Party throughout the post-war period. What sets it apart (and indeed connects it with the other modernisation strategies) is it strives to address specific issues faced by modern Britain, this time in 2015, rather than 1997, 1964, or 1945. This fits within the longstanding argument that it is a Labour *movement*, not a Labour *museum*. Labour does not sit still, nor seek to preserve an idealised vision of Britain. Rather it moves with the times, and so is the case with One Nation Labour.

To that end modern Britain is faced with unique challenges which One Nation Labour aims to address. Following the financial crisis of 2008 after which Brown used the resources of the state to rescue the Banks, the British economy has been saddled with the debt which the Coalition has treated as a public debt, thereby cutting social spending, leading to rising levels of poverty and social destitution. This is something which One Nation Labour seeks to address.

Furthermore, the Eurozone Crisis risks undermining one of the core functions of the EU, which is to collectivise national economies in the expectation of growth and alleviating conflict and extremism. In the contexts of rising nationalism, this has illustrated the rates of immigration, which Miliband argues can be managed in a nuanced rather than arbitrary manner, thereby favouring skills. And the United Kingdom is under threat from rising internal nationalism and broader social discontent in the North. This is an increasingly divided union which the concept of togetherness aims to address.

So, to begin summing up, One Nation Labour is designed to tackle social and economic issues by embracing longstanding social democratic values. Of course the values are largely the same as they always have been. Social justice, equality of opportunity, and a fairer Britain, which includes a healthy working relationship with the EU. But they have been reformed to reflect the contemporary realities of an ever disunited kingdom.

In terms of the moniker of One Nation Labour itself, however, it isn't likely to survive beyond the time in which it is useful for Miliband's leadership of the Party. But that is the same as all the other renewal labels which Labour has used throughout its recent history. So, I would argue that it is the values of Labourism which we need to pay the greater attention to, which are far more resilient, longer lasting, and frankly more important than the branding which any leadership gives to what are essentially Labour values at any given point.

Furthermore, One Nation Labour is the latest stage in a long history of continual renewal and change. Historically, the need to renew tended to be because an older ideological perspective had become stale. It had been worn out politically, socially, and externally with the electorate. For example, the electorate became bored with New Labour, but not the values of New Labour. One Nation Labour will last until it is no longer expedient for the Labour leadership to keep it. But if I leave no other message, it is that – regardless of what they are called – Labour values are always there, and will be in what follows One Nation Labour. Social justice. Equality of opportunity. Combatting inequality. These are as Labour as Labour gets, regardless of what it calls itself at any given moment.

Thank you.

¹ A. Crines, *Michael Foot and the Labour Leadership*, Newcastle, CSP, 2012.

² A. Crines, 'A Discussion of Rhetoric in Harold Wilson's White Heat Speech', *Renewal Journal of Social Democracy*, 22 (3-4), 128-134, 2014.

³ H. Wilson, *The Relevance of British Socialism*, London, Widenfeld and Nicolson, 1964.

⁴ P. McCormick, 'The Labour Party: Three Unnoticed Changes', *British Journal of Political Science*, 10 (3) 381-387, 1980.

⁵ A. Thorpe, *The History of the Labour Party*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2008.

⁶ D. Moon, 'The Oratory of Neil Kinnock', in *Labour Orators from Bevan to Miliband*, Manchester, MUP, 2015.

⁷ J. Cronin, *New Labour's Pasts*, London, Routledge, 2004.

⁸ T. Bale, *Five Year Mission: The Labour Party Under Ed Miliband*, Oxford, OUP, 2015.

⁹ A. Crines, 'The Oratory of Ed Miliband', *Labour Orators from Bevan to Miliband*, Manchester, MUP, 2015.

¹⁰ J. Gaffney and A. Lahel, 'Political Performance and Leadership Persona: The UK Labour Party Conference of 2012', *Government and Opposition*, 48 (4) 481-505, 2013.